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Cattle drive: Drought forcing farmers to sell

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Drought and the resulting hay shortage have many area cows on the move. (Clay Jackson photo)



Farmers watch the auction at the Garrard County Stockyards Friday as they consider a likely hay shortage this winter. (Clay Jackson photo)

Tommy Mink brought 18 cows to the Garrard County Stockyards on Friday morning. He farms in Rockcastle County and says he's hit both the Richmond and Garrard yards this week.

"There's very little hay, very little pasture, but a lot of cattle," Mink said.

Cattle are selling cheaper, too, since so many farmers are heading to market earlier than normal because of the drought.

Mink normally sells his cows for 50 cents a pound, but now they're going for 43-45 cents.

Lee Meyer, an extension specialist for livestock marketing with the University of Kentucky College of Agriculture, says some farmers are considering drastic measures if the drought continues.

"I've had some calls from farmers actually considering sending their cattle out West where hay is cheaper. They're thinking about pretty dramatic alternatives, which tells you they're getting desperate," Meyer said.

Farmers here would pay those in another state to care for their cattle until the weather improves. "In other words, I pay you 40 cents daily for my 50 cows, you put them on your pasture, you take care of them and feed them, then this fall and winter we put them back on a truck and send them home," Meyer said.

The idea would involve states such as Oklahoma or Missouri, which have had better weather this year.

Selling earlier

Meyer was working on an analysis of the idea Friday, and said so far, he's not so convinced the economics will support it.



Michael Crowe of Hustonville: "We don't want to sell right now, but we're gonna have to, no choice." (Clay Jackson photo)

Lincoln County Agricultural Agent Dan Grigson said some of the larger stockyard operations in Fayette or Clark counties may be thinking about that, but so far the idea is uncommon locally.

"But if you look at the last two weeks' records from area stockyards, it's easy to see that farmers are definitely selling ... earlier," Grigson said.

Some farmers are selling cattle that are old or aren't their best, and are weaning calves earlier.

"Lincoln County is the fifth largest cattle county in Kentucky, so this affects us very much. We're also in the top five as far as the state's numbers in dairy, so it's been pretty tough," Grigson said.

Tommy Mink said Rockcastle County got more rain Thursday than it's received since May. "But I still hauled off every one of my neighbor's herd yesterday. He sold all of his. We have to."

Mink said cows are normally sold around September or October, or even the first of the year. But Garrard's yard was booming Friday.

"The last three weeks have been hectic," said employee Wendy Ware, standing outside pulling receipts out several at a time. "We have six big loads coming in today, and we're normally slow this time of year."

Price down a little

Gary Cromer, office manager, says the price is down a bit for farmers but not too much. Although he'd do a rain dance if he could, the booming sales are a blessing for business.

"I have to admit, it is kind of good," Cromer says. "We're never this busy this time of year ..."

Michael Crowe hauled a huge bull to the stockyards for his neighbor in Hustonville. He was hoping the bull would bring close to 50 cents a pound but said 40 cents probably would be more realistic.

"We don't want to sell right now, but we're gonna have to, no choice," he said. "And it's all going for way cheaper than it was before."

Mink said his alfalfa and corn are dying. He stuck up a forefinger to show how tall his cornstalks are. "We need 3-4 inches of rain to even begin to get through this, or federal relief would help."

The only good thing out of the drought may be cheaper hamburger at the market, he said.

Could lead to tighter supplies

UK's Meyer said that's not likely to happen, though. "This is not widespread enough to have much of an

impact on beef prices."

However, corn crops are being negatively affected, which in turn affects cattle, he said.

"In a normal drought year, if hay supplies are very tight, farmers can buy corn to supplement as feed. But now a third of Kentucky's corn crop is going into ethanol, which drives the price up," Meyer said. The cost doesn't make corn a very feasible supplement for feed.

"If you're a farmer, that's great. But if you're a livestock producer, it's not so great. It will have an impact on meat supply and meat prices over the year."

Meyer said in the long run, if farmers cut back on cattle numbers, the end result likely will be tighter supplies two to three years from now.

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